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An Ethiopian Restaurant in the United States

 When deciding which restaurant would be a good choice for our observation, we thought a special type of restaurant would be more distinctive. Thus, the chosen restaurant of our team was Addis Red Sea, an Ethiopian restaurant which is located at 544 Tremont Street in Boston. Compared to Chinese, Korean and American restaurants, Ethiopian restaurants are a relatively minority in the United States. I was particularly curious about Ethiopian food since I had never tried it before. Thus, I wanted to explore the features of Addis Red Sea in this ethnography project by talking about the restaurant’s business, environment and food.

I have visited the restaurant for two times. The first visit was on a Saturday at noon with all the members in my group. There were only two to three groups of clients in the restaurant during our visit. The groups basically consisted of a man and a little girl, two women who seemed to be friends and a man and a woman who were probably a couple. My second visit was on a Saturday at night. During that time, there were many more people in the restaurant and the first floor was almost full (the restaurant has a basement but it is a bar so people usually have their dinner on the first floor). The groups were very diverse. There were two groups of families which each had more than five people, five groups of friends; three groups of couples and one group of only one person who came alone. No matter how many people there were in the restaurant, there were no Ethiopian customers. This is very weird because usually Chinese restaurants have many Chinese customers, Korean restaurants have many Korean customers and so forth. The manager then told me the reason: Ethiopian people always eat at home and they only dine out for special events. This is totally different from Chinese culture and American culture because Chinese people and American people often eat at restaurants. However, Ethiopian people still order take-out. According to the manager, there was a lot of take-out during that day. I then thought about the restaurant’s business in Ethiopia. If Ethiopian people seldom eat out, there would be few restaurants in Ethiopia or the restaurants would probably only offer take-out. Recently, the amount of restaurants in China is largely increasing and merchants are trying to create unique taste of their foods to attract customers. This phenomenon may never appear in Ethiopia since Ethiopian people’s custom is eating at home.

The restaurant’s environment is very exotic and I could feel the owner had put a lot of effort in embellishing it. The first striking element in the restaurant is a special type of table called “Mesob” which is made of rattan. The manager said in the beginning there were some normal tables and only a few mesobs in the restaurant. The clients would wait for mesob even they could use the normal one. So mesob is an appealing element in Ethiopian restaurants. There are many portraits placed on the wall. The portraits are about some Ethiopian people participating rituals or eating together. Besides, there are many other decorations in the restaurant including various types of sculptures, vases, hides, instruments, spears and mascots. A big showcase is placed near the entry. In the showcase, there are some photos, trophies, certificates, national flags and books about Ethiopia and its history. The light in the restaurant is a little bit dim. During our first visit there was no extra light in the restaurant. However, candles were placed on every table when I visited there again. The manager said Valentine’s day is the busiest day in a year. I think it is due to the romantic and quiet atmosphere of the restaurant. Also, this quiet and romantic environment is very different from Chinese restaurants’ environments. Chinese restaurants always have bright lights and they are generally not very quiet.

The food plays a very important role in the restaurant. During the first visit, we ordered a combination dish called Addis Red Sea special combo which consisted of tomato, green cabbage, chicken, beef and lamb with a lot of bread. We used hands to pick a piece of bread, wrapped a meat in it and then ate it. Combination dishes are the most popular and common dishes in the restaurant. When I was observing in the restaurant during the two visits, almost 80% of customers ordered it. The manager said they always use fresh materials because Ethiopian people think everything has to be fresh. They also use healthy materials like ginger and garlic as seasonings. Besides, Ethiopian food cannot stand for general African food, it is only similar to the food in the east part of Africa. The manager also said that about 95% clients had said the food was amazing and they never had this kind of food before. Accordingly, Addis has many returned customers.

 According to the manager, the taste of the food and the environment are the main reasons for people choosing this restaurant. Now the rent of their restaurant is very high and they are becoming increasingly difficult to survive, but the price of their food is still very reasonable. So I think the delicious food, the romantic and quiet environment and the acceptable price are the main reasons for this restaurant surviving for 26 years.

Word Count:907